



*Relevant Modernity*  
*Abhimanyu Devagouda Anirban Sengupta*

*Relevant Modernity*  
*Abhimanyu Devagouda Anirban Sengupta*

RELEVANT MODERNITY  
BY  
ABHIMANYU DEVEGOWDA ANIRBAN SENGUPTA

EDITOR  
BIVASHKANTI GUPTABAKSHI

PUBLISHED  
1<sup>ST</sup> JANUARY 2018

PUBLICATION  
SALOK PUBLISHERS

ISBN 978-93-5288-703-3

250.00 /-

## INTRODUCTION

At present Abhimanyu Devegowda Anirban Sengupta starts to research on Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore Songs) and its contemporary and non-contemporary way with the help of various information with his honorable teacher and guide Mr. Bivashkanti Guptabakshi. Abhimanyu Devegowda Anirban Sengupta and his teacher Mr. Bivashkanti Guptabakshi's main tendency is to unfold the flowness of the thinking of Rabindranath in making of the songs at different steps of Rabindra Sangeet. They believe that the changing course of Rabindra Sangeet also effects the Bengali literature and culture. So they try to focus on patriotism of Rabindranath Tagore and the glimpses of his musical sense through the project "Review of Tagore Works".

At last our dream comes to a shape of reality, we both, myself Bivashkanti Guptabakshi and Abhimanyu Devegowda Anirban Sengupta started thinking about something which would different in the field of literature. Now we are in the open daylight with our creation. In this works we try to be open from every aspect. It means that our literary works try to cover every dimension of the versatile talent of Rabindranath Tagore and his contemporary of Jorasanko Thakur Bari. We are just opening our petals of little knowledge we have about literature and the works of Rabindranath Tagore. So, try to come close to our works which is nothing but a humanization of Rabindranath Tagore who is very much our friend, philosopher and guide.

Salok Publishers

## THE PROJECT RESOUND OF TAGORE SONGS

At the continual fact of Bengal, Tagore works and limelight of his literary works were impressed to Bengal and others many countries of our world.

Previous day, Mr. Bivashkanti Guptabakshi called me at midnight and he wants to know about the history of Indian National Anthem.

I received the call and understand the fact of "Project Resound". "Project Resound" is my research project and part of "Project Review" also a largely research by myself.

"Tagore Songs" was created an abstract musical sense of the world, when that music throw down by auspicious vocalist, the great Rabindranath Tagore.

At presented time, contextual modernism has broken and also some facts of fictional modernism spread in our Bengal music. Think that of 1911th when Rabi wrote the song "Jana Gana Mana".

The Brahmo hymn is the national anthem of India. Written in Bengali, the first of five stanzas of the hymn title "Bharat Bhagyo Bidhata". It was adopted in its Hindi version by the Constituent Assembly in the year 1950 on 24th January as the national anthem of India.

Tagore sung this lyrics on 26th December 1911 at the house of Dr. Nilratan Sarkar with the help of Dinendranath Tagore in Calcutta. Tagore performed the song at the live session of the Indian National Congress on 27th December 1911 and again in January 1912 at the annual event of the "Adi Brahmo Samaj".

8th May 2016

## THE PROJECT REVIEW OF TAGORE WORKS

### 1

A few days ago William Butler Yeats said to a distinguished Bengali doctor of medicine, *'I know no German, yet if a translation of a German poet had moved me, I would go to the British Museum and find books in English that would tell me something of his life, and of the history of his thought. But though these prose translations from Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years, I shall not know anything of his life, and of the movements of thought that have made them possible, if some Indian traveller will not tell me.'*

It seemed to him natural that Yeats should be moved, for he said, *'I read Rabindranath every day, to read one line of his is to forget all the troubles of the world.'*

Yeats said, *'An Englishman living in London in the reign of Richard the Second had he been shown translations from Petrarch or from Dante, would have found no books to answer his questions, but would have questioned some Florentine banker or Lombard merchant as I question you. For all I know, so abundant and simple is this poetry, the new renaissance has been born in your country and I shall never know of it except by hearsay.'*

He answered, *'We have other poets, but none that are his equal; we call this the epoch of Rabindranath. No poet seems to me as famous in Europe as he is among us. He is as great in music as in poetry, and his songs are sung from the west of India into Burma wherever Bengali is spoken. He was already famous at nineteen when he wrote his first novel; and plays when he was but little older, are still played in Calcutta. I so much admire the completeness of his life; when he was very young he wrote much of natural objects, he would sit all day in his garden; from his twenty-fifth year or so to his thirty-fifth perhaps, when he had a great sorrow, he wrote the most beautiful love poetry in our language'; and then he said with deep emotion, 'words can never express what I owed at seventeen to his love poetry. After that his art grew deeper, it became religious and philosophical; all the inspiration of mankind are in his hymns. He is the first among our saints who has not refused to live, but has spoken out of Life itself, and that is why we give him our love.'*

I may have changed his well-chosen words in my memory but not his thought. *'A little while ago he was to read divine service in one of our churches---we of the Brahma Samaj use your word 'church' in English---it was the largest in Calcutta and not only was it crowded, but the streets were all but impassable because of the people.'*

## 2

Other Indians came to see Yeats and their reverence for this man sounded strange in our world, where we hide great and little things under the same veil of obvious comedy and half-serious depreciation. When we were making the cathedrals had we a like reverence for our great men? *'Every morning at three---I know, for I have seen it'---one said to Yeats, 'he sits immovable in contemplation, and for two hours does not awake from his reverie upon the nature of God. His father, the Maha Rishi, would sometimes sit there all through the next day; once, upon a river, he fell into contemplation because of the beauty of the landscape, and the rowers waited for eight hours before they could continue their journey.'* He then told Yeats of Mr. Tagore's family and how for generations great men have come out of its cradles.

*'Today,' he said, 'there are Gogonendranath and Abanindranath Tagore, who are artists; and Dwijendranath, Rabindranath's brother, who is a great philosopher. The squirrels come from the boughs and climb on to his knees and the birds alight upon his hands.'*

Yeats notice in these men's thought a sense of visible beauty and meaning as though they held that doctrine of Nietzsche that we must not believe in the moral or intellectual beauty which does not sooner or later impress itself upon physical things. Yeats said, *'In the East you know how to keep a family illustrious.'*

The other day the curator of a museum pointed out to me a little dark-skinned man who was arranging their Chinese prints and said, *"That is the hereditary connoisseur of the Mikado, he is the fourteenth of his family to hold the post."*

He answered, *'When Rabindranath was a boy he had all round him in his home literature and music.'*

Yeats thought of the abundance, of the simplicity of the poems, and said, *'In your country is there much propagandist writing, much criticism? We have to do so much, especially in my own country, that our minds gradually cease to be creative, and yet we cannot help it. If our life was not a continual warfare, we would not have taste, we would not know what is good, we would not find hearers and readers. Four-fifths of our energy is spent in the quarrel with bad taste, whether in our own minds or in the minds of others.'*

*'I understand,' he replied, 'we too have our propagandist writing. In the villages they recite long mythological poems adapted from the Sanskrit in the Middle Ages, and they often insert passages telling the people that they must do their duties.'*

Yeats have carried the manuscript of these translations about with Yeats for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and Yeats have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved Yeats. These lyrics---which are in the original, Yeats's Indians tell Yeats, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention---display in their thought a world Yeats have dreamed of all Yeats live long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble. If the civilization of Bengal remains unbroken, if that common mind which---as one divines---runs through all, is not, as with us, broken into a dozen minds that know nothing of each other, something even of what is most subtle in these verses will have come, in a few generations, to the beggar on the roads. When there was but one mind in England, Chaucer wrote his *Troilus and Cressida*, and thought he had written to be read, or to be read out---for our time was coming on apace---he was sung by minstrels for a while. Rabindranath Tagore, like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defence. These verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables, who turn the pages with indolent hands that they may sigh over a life without meaning, which is yet all they can know of life, or be carried by students at the university to be laid aside when the work of life begins, but, as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon the rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth. At every moment the heart of this poet flows outward to these without derogation or condescension, for it has known that they will understand; and it has filled itself with the circumstance of their lives. The traveller in the read-brown clothes that he wears that dust may not show upon him, the girl searching in her bed for the petals fallen from the wreath of her royal lover, the servant or the bride awaiting the master's home-coming in the empty house, are images of the heart turning to God. Flowers and rivers, the blowing of conch shells, the heavy rain of the Indian July, or the moods of that heart in union or in separation; and a man sitting in a boat upon a river playing lute, like one of those figures full of mysterious meaning in a Chinese picture, is God Himself. A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream.

Since the Renaissance the writing of European saints---however familiar their metaphor and the general structure of their thought---has ceased to hold our attention. We know that we must at last forsake the world, and we are accustomed in moments of weariness or exaltation to consider a voluntary forsaking; but how can we, who have read so much poetry, seen so many paintings, listened to so much music, where the cry of the flesh and the cry of the soul seems one, forsake it harshly and rudely? What have we in common with St. Bernard covering his eyes that they may not dwell upon the beauty of the lakes of Switzerland, or with the violent rhetoric of the Book of Revelations? We would, if we might, find, as in this book, words full of courtesy. *'I have got my leave. Bid me farewell, my brothers! I bow to you all and take my departure. Here Yeats give back the keys of my door---and Yeats give up all claims to my house. I only ask for last kind words from you. We were neighbours for long, but I received more than I could give. Now the day has dawned and the lamp that lit my dark corner is out. A summons has come and I am ready for my journey.'* And it is our own mood, when it is furthest from 'a Kempis or John of the Cross, that cries, *'And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well.'* Yet it is not only in our thoughts of the parting that this book fathoms all. We had not known that we loved God, hardly it may be that we

believed in Him; yet looking backward upon our life we discover, in our exploration of the pathways of woods, in our delight in the lonely places of hills, in that mysterious claim that we have made, unavailingly on the woman that we have loved, the emotion that created this insidious sweetness. *'Entering my heart unbidden even as one of the common crowd, unknown to me, my king, thou didst press the signet of eternity upon many a fleeting moment.'* This is no longer the sanctity of the cell and of the scourge; being but a lifting up, as it were, into a greater intensity of the mood of the painter, painting the dust and the sunlight, and we go for a like voice to St. Francis and to William Blake who have seemed so alien in our violent history.

## 5

We write long books where no page perhaps has any quality to make writing a pleasure, being confident in some general design, just as we fight and make money and fill our heads with politics---all dull things in the doing---while Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity. He often seems to contrast life with that of those who have loved more after our fashion, and have more seeming weight in the world, and always humbly as though he were only sure his way is best for him: *'Men going home glance at me and smile and fill me with shame. I sit like a beggar maid, drawing my skirt over my face, and when they ask me, what it is I want, I drop my eyes and answer them not.'* At another time, remembering how his life had once a different shape, he will say, *'Many an hour I have spent in the strife of the good and the evil, but now it is the pleasure of my playmate of the empty days to draw my heart on to him; and I know not why this sudden call to what useless inconsequence.'* An Innocence, a simplicity that one does not find elsewhere in literature makes the birds and the leaves seem as near to him as they are near to children, and the changes of the seasons great events as before our thoughts had arisen between them and us. At times Yeats wonder if he has it from the literature of Bengal or from religion, and at other times, remembering the birds alighting on his brother's hands, Yeats find pleasure in thinking it hereditary, a mystery that was growing through the centuries like the courtesy of a Tristan or a Pelanore. Indeed, when he is speaking of children, so much a part of himself this quality seems, one is not certain that he is not also speaking of the saints, *'They build their houses with sand and they play with empty shells. With withered leaves they weave their boats and smilingly float them on the vast deep. Children have their play on the seashore of worlds. They know not how to swim, they know not how to cast nets. Pearl fishers dive for pearls, merchants sail in their ships, while children gather pebbles and scatter them again. They seek not for hidden treasures, they know not how to cast nets.'*

19<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2017, 1711HOURS

## SANTINIKETAN

### THE MAKING OF CONTEXTUAL MODERNISM

""Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism"" was an exhibition curated by R. Siva Kumar at the National Gallery of Modern Art in 1997, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of India's Independence.

The exhibition, through bringing about a hundred works each of four modern Indian artists, namely Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Ram Kinker Baij and Benode Behari Mukherjee on the centre stage, put the Santiniketan art movement into focus.

Kumar argues that the "Santiniketan artists did not believe that to be indigenous one has to be historicist either in theme or in style, and similarly to be modern one has to adopt a particular trans-national formal language or technique. Modernism was to them neither a style nor a form of internationalism. It was critical re-engagement with the foundational aspects of art necessitated by changes in one's unique historical position".

The year 1997 bore witness to two parallel gestures of canon formation. On the one hand, the Baroda Group, a coalition whose original members included Vivan Sundaram, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar, and Nalini Malani—and which had left its mark on history in the form of the 1981 exhibition "Place for People"—was definitively historicized in 1997 with the publication of Contemporary Art in Baroda, an anthology of essays edited by Sheikh. On the other hand, the art historian Kumar's exhibition and related publication, "A Contextual Modernism", focused on the Santiniketan artists Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij. Of the Santiniketan artists, Kumar observed that they "reviewed traditional antecedents in relation to the new avenues opened up by cross-cultural contacts. They also saw it as a historical imperative. Cultural insularity, they realized, had to give way to eclecticism and cultural impurity."

According to Kumar "The Santiniketan artists were one of the first who consciously challenged this idea of modernism by opting out of both internationalist modernism and historicist indigenouness and tried to create a context sensitive modernism."

The literary critic Ranjit Hoskote while reviewing the works of contemporary artist Atul Dodiya writes, "The exposure to Santinketan, through a literary detour, opened Dodiya's eyes to the historical circumstances of what Kumar has called a "contextual modernism" developed in eastern India in the 1930s and '40s during the turbulent decades of the global Depression, the Gandhian liberation struggle, the Tagorean cultural renaissance and World War II."

Kumar had been studying the work of the Santiniketan masters and thinking about their approach to art since the early 1980s. The practice of subsuming Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Ram Kinker Baij and Benode Behari Mukherjee under the Bengal School of Art was misleading. According to Kumar, "this happened because early writers were guided by genealogies of apprenticeship rather than their styles, worldviews, and perspectives on art practice'.

Kumar draws distinction between "Santiniketan the art movement" and "Santiniketan the School":

*I am not sure, however, if everyone noticed the distinction I drew between Santiniketan as an art movement and Santiniketan as a school very clearly. There was both a Santiketan movement and a Santiniketan school, but these are two different things. The movement was shaped by the practices of the masters, chiefly Nandalal, Benodebehari, Ramkinkar and Rabindranath. Their art practices were interrelated but did not stylistically converge. They were linked more by concerns and as participants in a discourse to which each contributed in a different manner. They themselves saw this very clearly but many who wrote about them did not. They either plumped for Nandalal and Benodebehari, or for Ramkinkar and Rabindranath; one pair representing a traditionalist position and the other a modernist position. I am not suggesting that there are no differences between them but that they saw themselves as co-authors of an art scene being essayed around shared issues, complementing each other and expanding their concerns and reach rather than at war with each other.*



## ALL THE SHARED EXPERIENCES OF THE LIVED WORLD

*The brief survey of the individual works of the core Santiniketan artists and the thought perspectives they open up makes clear that though there were various contact points in the work they were not bound by a continuity of style but by a community of ideas. Which they not only shared but also interpreted and carried forward. Thus they do not represent a school but a movement.*

*Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism, 1997*

## THE LAST HARVEST

""The Last Harvest"" was an exhibition of Rabindranath Tagore's paintings to mark the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth. It was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture (India) and organised with the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA). It consisted of 208 paintings drawn from the collections of Visva Bharati and the NGMA. The exhibition was curated by art historian R. Siva Kumar. Asia Art Archive later classified the exhibition as a "world event".

Surrounded by several painters Rabindranath had always wanted to paint. Writing and music, playwriting and acting came to him naturally and almost without training, as it did to several others in his family, and in even greater measure. But painting eluded him. Yet he tried repeatedly to master the art and there are several references to this in his early letters and reminiscence. In 1900 for instance, when he was nearing forty and already a celebrated writer, he wrote to Jagadishchandra Bose, "You will be surprised to hear that I am sitting with a sketchbook drawing. Needless to say, the pictures are not intended for any salon in Paris, they cause me not the least suspicion that the national gallery of any country will suddenly decide to raise taxes to acquire them. But, just as a mother lavishes most affection on her ugliest son, so I feel secretly drawn to the very skill that comes to me least easily." He also realized that he was using the eraser more than the pencil, and dissatisfied with the results he finally withdrew, deciding it was not for him to become a painter.

Although he gave up the hope of becoming an artist around 1900, Rabindranath continued to doodle in his manuscripts. He turned struck-out words into ornamental motifs and sometimes linked the scratched out words on the pages of his manuscripts into an art-nouveau-like arabesque. This continued without much change until the end of 1923. Then almost all of a sudden on the pages of the notebook he used during his tour of 1924 his doodles proliferated and assumed more representational and expressive intent. Victoria Ocampo who spotted these during his stay in Argentina as her guest was impressed and found artistic merit in them. "He played with erasures," she wrote, "following them from verse to verse with his pen, making lines that suddenly jumped into life out of this play: prehistoric monsters, birds, faces appeared."

These doodles in the Purabi manuscript that excited Ocampo in 1924 mark the beginnings of Rabindranath's artistic career. Rabindranath himself recognised such doodles as the beginnings of his art and wrote: "The only training I had from my young days was the training in rhythm in thought, the rhythm in sound. I had come to know that rhythm gives reality to that which is desultory, which is insignificant in itself. And therefore, when the scratches in my manuscript cried, like sinners, for salvation, and assailed my eyes with the ugliness of their irrelevance, I often took more time in rescuing them into a merciful finality of rhythm than in carrying on what was my obvious task." He also called this his "unconscious training in drawing." And described the imagery that emerged as follows: "... when the

vagaries of the ostracized mistakes had their conversion into rhythmic inter-relationship, giving birth to unique forms and characters. Some assumed the temperate exaggeration of a probable animal that had unaccountably missed its chance of existence... Some lines showed anger, some placid benevolence, through some lines ran an essential laughter. ... These lines often expressed passions that were abstract, evolved characters that hung upon subtle suggestions."

After four years of involved doodling, Rabindranath began to do independent paintings in 1928. And six years after he first noticed the expressive strength of his doodles in 1930 Ocampo helped him organize the first exhibition of his paintings in Paris. This was followed by a string of exhibitions across Europe, in Russia, England and America. He was the first Indian artist to be exhibited widely in the West. He felt that different as his works were from the art of his Indian contemporaries they stood a better chance to be appreciated in the West. And many of his first viewers in the West, and these included seasoned artists and connoisseurs, were appreciative. However, they were fleeting encounters and they saw his work as an extension of Western art and not in relation to the totality of his oeuvre or in relation to India. His familiarity with the "primitive" and modern traditions of art played a role in his emergence as a painter. But it is only in the context of post-forties Indian art that Rabindranath's paintings find their true place in the history of modernism and it is in this context they need to be looked at.

Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh observes Tagore's paintings at the Asia Society. Though Rabindranath began to paint only in 1928 when he was sixty-seven he painted well over two thousand paintings. It was as Abanindranath Tagore said a "volcanic eruption" that continued unabated for the last thirteen years of his life. Coming at the end of a hugely creative life spreading across six decades and involving work in several mediums and genres the question of how his paintings relate to the rest of his oeuvre rises. Is there a unifying theme or universal "truth" running through all his creations? It would be difficult to give a categorical and simple answer but the following words of Rabindranath from *My Pictures*, a statement he made in 1930 in connection with his paintings might contain a lead.

"But one thing which is common to all arts is the principle of rhythm which transforms inert materials into living creations. My instinct for it and my training in its use led me to know that lines and colours in art are no carriers of information; they seek their rhythmic incarnation in pictures. Their ultimate purpose is not to illustrate or to copy some outer fact or inner vision, but to evolve a harmonious wholeness which finds its passage through our eyesight into imagination. It neither questions our mind for meaning nor burdens it with unmeaningness, for it is, above all, meaning."

*The Last Harvest* is an international exhibition commissioned and fully supported by the Government of India as part of Rabindranath's 150th birth anniversary celebrations. It brings together a representative selection of his works culled from the collections of Rabindra Bhavana and Kala Bhavana at Santiniketan, and the National Gallery of Modern Art.

Rabindranath's life, his works and the history of his institutions mark a progress from nationalism to universal humanism. His paintings belong to the period of universal humanism and linked as they may be to personal experiences they have a universal appeal. In consonance with it Rabindranath did not title his drawings and paintings. He also did not date most of them. Thus they come to us as an open-ended oeuvre, encouraging us to respond to them with our sensibilities and find linkages between them. In other words, he encourages the viewers to embark on a curatorial process. This exhibition is one such effort.

In this exhibition the works are grouped into what may be considered four important facets of his oeuvre. His earliest paintings grew out of the doodles he did in his manuscripts while attempting to turn crossed out words and discarded lines into visually exciting motifs. These have an element of playful inventiveness and involve morphological cross-projections that defy perceptual experience. If the

subliminal played an important part in his first paintings, painting itself led him to pay attention to the pageant of forms in nature. The landscapes included in these selections are a token of this shift. As he progressed he also began to see the human body not merely as form but as gestures carrying within them the seeds of visual narration and theatre – ambivalent as they may remain without the benefit of names. A third group of paintings bring this into focus. And finally there are his representations of the human face; hovering between hieratic masks and individualised portraits, they turn countenance into characters.

The four groups may be highlighted thus:

Group 1

This group contains some of his earliest paintings, they are either geometrical or arabesque and have an element of playful inventiveness involving morphological cross-projections that defy reality.

Group 2

Nature was an enduring theme in Rabindranath's writings and songs, he felt a deep companionship with nature since his childhood. A more meditative and observant come through in his landscapes and flower pieces.

Group 3

As a playwright and actor Rabindranath was sensitive to gesture and its dramatic and narrative potential; the paintings in this group bring this into focus.

Group 4

This group consists of his representations of the human face into which he reads traces of social and personal life. They are products of observation and psychological probing.

Finally a word about the title. For Rabindranath who welcomed contact with other cultures to foster creativity, and for whom the touchstone of authenticity was not the lineage of one's language but one's ability to make it one's own, the value of art lay not in its source or style but in being an imperative of life.

And painting was the last enchantment of his life, his last personal imperative. "I am hopelessly entangled in the spell that the lines have cast all around me.... If I were a free agent ... unburdened by any care," he wrote to close friend in 1928 just when he was embarking on his career as a painter, "I would live by the Padma and gather a harvest of pictures and nothing but pictures to load the Golden Boat of Time with." He was burdened with too many commitments to allow himself that privilege but the harvest has been good (well over two thousand paintings in thirteen years) and this exhibition carries a small part of it eighty years after he himself had ferried it across the world for the first time.